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The Argument Against Relocating U.S. Forces In Europe

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INTRODUCTION

In recent months, a number of senior U.S. officials have discussed the possibility of realigning, reorganizing, and relocating U.S. forces in Europe. Leaving aside the Navy because of its relatively small presence in Europe, this paper outlines some of the major arguments against relocation of European-based U.S. Army and Air Force units to the continental United States (CONUS) or within Europe, including the cost, adverse impact on force deployment capability, and potentially negative politico-military consequences.

On 11 February 2003, Representative Duncan Hunter (California, Republican), Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee (HASC), announced that he would hold hearings regarding the realignment of U.S. forces in Europe. His statement specifies that the “ability to efficiently project our military power to problem areas must be our primary concern.” It goes on to say that, “With an expanded number of European allies, the U.S. may have the opportunity to base its forces in new locations with lower training and deployment costs.”¹ Similarly, in early February, in response to a question about the possibility of moving U.S. forces to Poland, Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, said, “We are reviewing our bases ... the center of gravity is shifting in the [NATO] alliance.”² He later expressed frustration about a delay in U.S. military deployments from Germany to Iraq because “we weren’t allowed to take forces across Austria by train.” At a Pentagon “town hall” meeting on 6 March 2003, Mr. Rumsfeld reportedly said, “the problem is that too many troops are currently concentrated in Germany, making it hard to move them around quickly.”³ He indicated that General James Jones, the Commander of U.S. European Command, would brief him on recommendations for reorganizing U.S. forces in Europe in the near future.⁴

On 7 February 2003, General Jones may have given a preview of his proposals when he told a Congressional delegation that transformation of Army units in Europe to a more mobile, flexible structure could reduce the number of U.S. troops in Germany and prompt the opening of new bases in Eastern Europe.⁵ More recently, he has “outlined plans for a scaled down U.S. military presence in Europe built around a network of hubs through which forces could be rotated in keeping with changing needs.”⁶

These proposals to realign, reorganize, and relocate U.S. forces in Europe do not appear to be linked to a reduction in the overall size of the U.S. military. Indeed, despite talk early in the administration of reducing the Army from ten to eight active component divisions, there now appears to be no impetus to reduce the active military below current levels. Rather, given current force commitments in the Balkans, Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere, coupled with the fact that there are over 200,000 total Reserve and National Guard on active duty, an argument could be made for increasing the size of the active military. That is particularly true if the administration has any intention of taking action against the other members of the “axis of evil” – North Korea and Iran – or if the U.S. and others are successful in getting Israel and Palestine to reach some kind of peace agreement and U.S. forces are needed to perform constabulary duties there or elsewhere.

The size of the active military is an important factor when one considers altering our European force posture. That is because, despite calls for another Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) Commission to rid the armed forces of costly, excess real estate, the base infrastructure in CONUS for major operational formations – Air Force fighter squadrons, groups and wings, and Army maneuver battalions, brigades and divisions – currently cannot accommodate the U.S. Forces based in Germany.

RELOCATING U.S. FORCES FROM EUROPE TO CONUS

Post-Cold War force reductions reduced Army and Air Force end-strength by about 36 percent each. These reductions targeted major operational formations. For example, the active Army was reduced from 16 Divisions, 3 Armored Cavalry Regiments (ACR), and 2 Separate Brigades to 10 Divisions, 2 ACRs, and no separate brigades. The Air Force reduced from 239 to 198 squadrons of all types (17%) and from 76 to 55 total fighter and heavy bomber squadrons (28%).⁷

U.S. forces in Europe were reduced from 312,000 military personnel to about 100,000 today. As a result, residual units were consolidated into the largest bases with the best training facilities and furthest from major population centers to minimize the impact of our training and operations on the local population. A significant number of bases were closed throughout Europe. In CONUS, some major installations such as Ft. Ord, California; Loring AFB, Maine; Pease AFB, New Hampshire; and Mather AFB, California, closed. However, reduction of CONUS installation space did not correspond to the scope of force reductions as the drawdown provided the opportunity to improve operational effectiveness, training, and quality of life at some of the residual posts.

The need to retain CONUS bases stemmed from the fact that, in some cases, tenant units had outgrown the base, particularly in terms of maneuver areas and firing ranges. Established or expanded from existing camps and stations as part of national mobilization for World War II, many posts were intended to accommodate the needs of primarily light infantry divisions and propeller-driven aircraft. In the meantime, mechanization and subsequent modernization of Army units meant that each unit could maneuver faster and cover a much greater piece of terrain than its predecessor. Similarly,

the increased range of modern weapons and munitions meant that firing ranges had to be expanded to allow Army vehicle crews and Air Force pilots to safely train to the capability of their weapons systems. On many bases, expansion of maneuver areas and firing ranges did not keep pace with weapon modernization, or with the increased frequency with which units used the training areas to meet stringent readiness standards.

In some cases, maintenance facilities and motor pools were not upgraded at the same rate that the Army modernized, meaning that existing facilities had difficulty accommodating larger, more modern weapon systems. At the same time, old barracks and administrative buildings – some dating back to World War II – deteriorated, but funding for military construction was not available to replace them. Too often, the result was a base that did not adequately accommodate its tenant units and their facility needs.

Increased sensitivity to environmental issues has compounded the challenge facing military installation managers. The need to protect endangered species and wetlands prevents the military from utilizing available land to its full capacity for training purposes or construction of new facilities. For example, the presence of the red-cockaded woodpecker at Ft. Bragg, North Carolina and the endangered desert tortoise at the National Training Center, in California, impose severe constraints on training activities at those bases. Similarly, noise pollution from aircraft training and operations or the use of firing ranges increasingly generates complaints from the local civilian population, necessitating the creation of a buffer zone or restriction of noise-producing activities to certain days of the week or hours of the day. Safety is also an issue. Due to encroachment and the proximity of civilian residential areas to the south end of the

runway, the Commander of Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada, requires aircraft carrying ordnance to depart to the north, even when southerly winds would suggest otherwise.

Thus, rather than perpetuate existing problems by closing its large, valuable CONUS bases, the Army, in particular, seized the opportunity provided by force reductions to improve operational effectiveness and training capability, and to relieve overcrowding at some installations. For example, in the early to mid-1990s, the constant deployment of Army Patriot battalions from bases throughout CONUS to the Middle East was beginning to adversely affect unit readiness and personnel retention. To streamline the support base, enhance training, and increase operational flexibility and effectiveness, the Army consolidated all of the CONUS-based Patriot battalions into Ft. Bliss, Texas. Doing so required the 3rd ACR to move from Ft. Bliss to Ft. Carson, Colorado, where it could use Pinon Canyon training area. Force reductions also reduced overcrowding and competition for training facilities at Ft. Carson, which had previously accommodated a three-brigade division. It became home to the ACR, a split-based brigade of the Ft. Hood-based 4th Infantry Division, and the 10th Special Forces Group, which relocated there to facilitate closure of Ft. Devens, Massachusetts. The Army also overcame overcrowding and training capacity shortfalls at Ft. Riley, Kansas, by inactivating the division headquarters and divisional troops, leaving just two brigades, each of which was affiliated with a European-based division. Meanwhile, swampy, heavily wooded Ft. Polk, Louisiana, the ill suited home of the 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized) before that unit inactivated, became the Joint Readiness Training Center, the light infantry's equivalent of the National Training Center in the desert at Ft. Irwin, California.⁸

The bottom line is that realignment of major operational formations to derive maximum value from the Army's CONUS base infrastructure means there is no, or at best very little, excess capacity to accommodate combat divisions, brigades and battalions if they relocate from Europe. Therefore, relocation would entail enormous costs for construction of new facilities. Even if funding was available to construct new facilities for Army units relocating from Europe, the increased demand for maneuver areas and firing ranges would exceed the capacity of the bases' training facilities and unit readiness would suffer. Relative to the Army, relocation of Air Force units from Europe to CONUS is somewhat easier. Training would not be degraded and, for the most part, there is sufficient ramp space at residual CONUS air bases to accommodate relocating units. However, where excess facility capacity exists in terms of hangars, administrative space, housing and other support facilities, either there's not enough at any one location to maintain Wing level unit integrity or the facilities do not meet USAF standards. As with the Army, that means there would be a huge bill for construction of new facilities. The rough magnitude of that bill can be estimated based on the fact that it cost about \$500 million to build up Aviano AFB, Italy, to accommodate two tactical fighter squadrons, consisting of 48 aircraft and about 3000 military personnel.⁹ Assuming those squadrons would remain in Aviano, relocating the other ten European-based USAF squadrons could generate an unprogrammed military construction cost of up to \$5 billion.

Operationally, deployment capability would be severely degraded if U.S. forces in Europe relocated to CONUS. The relocated Air Force units could no longer self-deploy to the mission area. Rather, they would now have to cross the Atlantic, placing additional demands on our already over-committed airlift and aerial refueling assets. And it would

be far worse for the Army units. In contrast to the long-standing prohibition on transit of combat vehicles through Austria, the German government has consistently supported the deployment of U.S. forces from their bases in Germany to other operational theaters. Not only have the Germans always given U.S. forces permission to deploy, but they have provided virtually unconstrained access to their unparalleled transportation infrastructure, including their road network, the Bundesbahn (Germany's outstanding federally-subsidized rail system), and their extensive seaport facilities. That transportation infrastructure, coupled with the relative proximity to and huge throughput capacity of northern European ports, most notably Rotterdam, greatly facilitates deployment of European-based U.S. forces. In contrast, the United States' rail system is in a state of decline, the highway system is overcrowded with commercial truck traffic, and with the exception of Ft. Stewart, Georgia, and Ft. Lewis, Washington, the distances from Army bases to seaports of debarkation are generally much greater. As a recent senior military guest speaker to the National War College put it, "Fort-to-port deployment in CONUS is just as hard as port-to-TAA [Tactical Assembly Area] movement in theater because of the poor inter-modal infrastructure in CONUS."¹⁰ Finally, it takes four to seven days longer for a ship to sail from CONUS to the Mediterranean than to sail from ports in northern Europe to the Mediterranean.¹¹

From a politico-military and coalition warfighting perspective, relocation of U.S. Forces from Europe to CONUS would have an equally adverse impact. Within NATO, the principle of proportionality governs the allocation of command billets among allied countries – the country that contributes the most commands the force. Our European-based forces demonstrate the U.S.' commitment to the Alliance and our willingness to

contribute highly capable military forces to NATO-led operations to secure our common interests. They substantiate our claim to Alliance leadership and the appointment of U.S. officers as Supreme Allied Commander for Operations (SAC-O, formerly SACEUR) and Supreme Allied Commander for Transformation (SAC-T, formerly SACLANT). Having U.S. Forces based in Europe also improves interoperability with the forces of those countries that are most capable, and under the right circumstances most likely, to join a U.S.-led coalition to conduct military operations worldwide. Common staff procedures, and compatible tactics, techniques and procedures (TTP), practiced in NATO exercises and operations like those in the Balkans, facilitate integration of NATO and Partnership for Peace countries' military forces. Withdrawal of European-based U.S. forces would inevitably undermine our ability to steer the formulation of Allied doctrine and lead to the erosion of the high tactical standards to which NATO forces aspire (if not always attain). Finally, it would preclude routine interaction and the associated sense of common purpose that lubricate possible points of friction in the conduct of coalition operations.

RELOCATING U.S. FORCES WITHIN EUROPE

Defense Secretary Rumsfeld sees NATO's center of gravity shifting to the east; HASC Chairman Hunter believes NATO enlargement may give the U.S. the opportunity to base its forces in new locations in Eastern Europe with lower training and deployment costs; and General Jones is thinking in terms of a scaled down U.S. military presence in Europe built around a network of hubs, including new bases in Eastern Europe, through which forces could rotate for training. As with relocating U.S. Forces from Germany to CONUS, there are major obstacles associated with relocating them to Eastern Europe.

First, relocating U.S. forces to former Warsaw Pact military bases in Poland, Bulgaria or Romania means building the base infrastructure from scratch. East European air bases lack modern control towers, runway lighting, ramp space, hangars, munitions storage, fuel tanks, administrative space, medical facilities, housing, and quality of life facilities like gymnasiums and recreation facilities common to existing U.S. bases. Similarly, Eastern European Army bases may have motor pools, but lack the maintenance bays, wash racks, sophisticated range complexes, instrumented maneuver space, rail spurs and rail loading ramps that have been built over time at U.S. bases in Germany.

Additionally, because the civil infrastructure in Eastern Europe often does not have the capability to provide adequate, clean, safe water; reliable electrical power; and proper treatment of sewage – especially in remote locations where military training would not disrupt the local population – infrastructure would have to be built to meet those demands. The U.S. would also have to be very careful to avoid assuming responsibility for remediation of the potentially significant, usually undocumented, environmental problems attributable to the Warsaw Pact forces that previously occupied that base.

The necessary construction would entail an enormous investment that would not be amortized for at least 50 years.¹² It is unlikely that the Allies could reach consensus to provide NATO Security Investment Program (NSIP) monies to replace existing U.S. facilities in Germany and Eastern European host countries do not have the capital to fund such extensive new construction. Therefore, the U.S. would have to foot the bill. Recalling that build-out of Aviano AFB, Italy, for 3000 military personnel cost \$500

million, building new base infrastructure for the 70,000 German-based U.S. military personnel would cost somewhere in the neighborhood of \$11.7 billion!

In addition to the prohibitive costs, deployment would be much slower and more difficult. Eastern European countries lack the transportation infrastructure of Germany. Roads are often not robust enough to accommodate military traffic and many railroads are narrow gauge, meaning they are ill suited for outsized military cargo and require time-intensive manual trans-loading when transferring to another country's wider-gauge rail system.¹³ No Baltic or Black Sea port or multiple ports of debarkation can match the throughput of Rotterdam and Bremerhaven and, finally, ships exiting from the Black Sea must transit the notorious shipping bottlenecks of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles.

From a politico-military perspective, there are some important points to consider before relocating U.S. Forces from Germany farther east. Turkey was once viewed as a strategically desirable host country for European-based U.S. forces. Recent experience in Operation Iraqi Freedom suggests that it was very fortunate that U.S. ground forces were not based in Turkey – in addition to prohibiting them from attacking south into Iraq, the Turkish Parliament might have blocked their deployment to Kuwait. Countries in Eastern Europe are still experimenting with democracy – only Slovenia has returned an elected government to power because no other east European government has been able to fulfill the expectations of its electorate. It is conceivable that a future host government that is less pro-American or an opposition coalition in Parliament might oppose a U.S.-led military operation and prevent deployment of U.S. forces to take part in the operation.

To preserve the strategic U.S.-Russian relationship sought by President Bush, the U.S. should also consider Russian reaction to basing U.S. forces in Eastern Europe. The

Russians view the Founding Act as a promise by the NATO Allies that they would not permanently base forces in Eastern Europe as the Alliance enlarged, and there are carefully developed regional ceilings on treaty-limited equipment (TLE) under the Conventional Forces Europe (CFE) treaty. According to the Deputy Chief of Mission at the Russian embassy in Washington, D.C., Russia would strongly object to permanent basing of U.S. forces in Eastern Europe, especially if it resulted in a violation of the CFE treaty's regional TLE ceilings. He indicated, however, that since the CFE treaty allows for temporary waivers of the regional TLE ceilings for exercises or even short-term operations, Russia would not object to units simply rotating into and out of eastern European bases for training.¹⁴ In other words, Russia could accept General Jones' proposal to rotate U.S. forces through hubs in Eastern Europe. The challenge then becomes finding a permanent home, ostensibly in CONUS, for the units that would rotate through the European hubs, then paying the cost of deploying those units and their equipment from CONUS for each training rotation.

Finally, relocating U.S. forces from Germany to Eastern Europe – or even excessive rhetoric as to our desire to do so – will exacerbate tensions between the U.S. and “old” Europe, especially Germany, and drive a wedge between “old” and “new” Europe. In fact, if we keep talking about relocating, the Germans could decide that they want our forces to move out. The outcome, to the delight of the French, would be reduced U.S. access and influence in the economic capital of Europe, and could lead to the creation of enduring ties among those who opposed the U.S. on Operation Iraqi Freedom. At a minimum, it will make it even harder to achieve consensus within NATO. That would be unfortunate because, as demonstrated by NATO's increased role in the

International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Kabul, Afghanistan, it can play a valuable role in safeguarding common U.S.-European security interests worldwide. We should consider all of these politico-military concerns before our rhetoric about relocation becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

CONCLUSION

The stated purpose of relocating U.S. Forces from Germany to CONUS or Eastern Europe is to improve our ability to “efficiently project our military power to problem areas” and base them “in new locations with lower training and deployment costs.” However, whether U.S. forces in Germany relocate to CONUS or Eastern Europe, their capability to deploy will be adversely affected. Moreover, whether U.S. forces in Germany relocate to CONUS or Eastern Europe, the cost to construct new base infrastructure to accommodate them would completely offset any possible reduction in training and deployment costs. Finally, the politico-military consequences of relocation are also on the negative side of the scorecard: undermining U.S. leadership of NATO; entrusting the geostrategic mobility of our forces to fledgling democracies with a relatively brief track record of supporting the U.S. and the actions we take to fulfill our national security objectives; jeopardizing the U.S.-Russia strategic relationship; and eroding U.S. influence in “old” Europe. Together, these deployment, cost, and politico-military considerations constitute a compelling argument against relocating U.S. forces in Europe.

ENDNOTES

¹ “House Armed Services Committee Chairman Announces Hearings Regarding the Realignment of U.S. Forces in Europe,” House Armed Services Committee Press Release, 11 Feb 2003,

<http://armedservices.house.gov/pressreleases/2003/03-02-11europeforces.html>

² Ian Traynor, “Washington to cut bases in Germany as its forces head east,” The Guardian, 11 Feb 2003,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/Print/0,3858,4603060,00.html>

³ Jim Mannion, “US Discussing Realigning US Forces in South Korea, Germany: Rumsfeld,” Agence

France-Presse, in ClariNews, 6 Mar 2003, http://quickstart.clari.net/qs_se/webnews/wed/an/Onato-us-germany-korea.RX8h_DM6.html

⁴ “United States Troop Basing” in SHAPE News Summary & Analysis, 7 Mar 2003,

<http://www.nato.int/shape/news/2003/03/s030307.htm>

⁵ Traynor, p. 1.

⁶ Mannion, p. 2.

⁷ “USAF Almanac 1998,” Air Force Magazine, Arlington, VA, Vol. 81, No. 5, May 1998, *and* “USAF Almanac 2002,” May 2002, <http://www.afa.org/almanac/almanac.html>

⁸ This information is based on my recollection of events that I planned and oversaw while working in the Force Integration & Management Division of the Operations Directorate of the Army Staff (DAMO-FDF).

⁹ Nancy Balkus, former Aviano 2000 Program Management Branch Chief, now a NWC student. She provided and confirmed this information in several conversations during April 2003. Additional information is also available at http://www.afcesa.af.mil/Publications/CEMag/AFCE/CSS/AFCE_1.htm

¹⁰ Senior U.S. military official (anonymous due to NWC’s non-attribution policy), 15 Apr 2003.

¹¹ My recollection of the Mobility Requirement Study Bottom Up Review Update (MRS-BURU).

¹² Nancy Balkus, 50-year amortization was the planning figure for Aviano 2000 construction costs.

¹³ My recollection of a SHAPE study of NATO aspirants’ infrastructure for reinforcement purposes.

¹⁴ DCM responding to my question during a 23 April 03 Field Studies visit to the Russian embassy.